

Jad woke, horrified. The ground had trembled. Or at least, he thought it had. Damn nightmares. When his eyes snapped open, he was looking up at a small, moon-lit hole in the heavily-patched canvas tent above him. The hole bobbed slightly in a breeze from outside, but everything else was still. He put his calloused hands down on the dirt on either side of him and lay motionless, willing the ground to move again.

“Didja feel that?” he whispered. He wanted to hear his wife’s voice. He needed to be sure the ground hadn’t actually moved.

Kalira didn’t reply. Everything inside their dusty tent was as still as death. As Jad lay on his back and listened, Mother Wind sang her usual requiem from the colony’s edge, trying to convince him nothing new had happened. He knew she wanted to lure him back to sleep, but his fear had brought him completely awake. He often had nightmares; with a past like his, it was hard not to.

He reached out to lay a hand on the soft skin of Kalira’s shoulder, but found nothing. Kalira was gone.

“Lira?” he called into the darkness. He sat up and pushed aside his tattered blanket.

Then the ground shook.

Jad hurried to his feet, feeling warmth returning to him as his heart began to pound in his chest. Not a nightmare. He had been right.

Bent low to avoid hitting his head, he shuffled to the tent flap and pushed it out of the way to get a look outside.

It was a beautiful summer’s night. The air was calm and warm, and the stars twinkled faintly through the dusty haze above. Most of the other Colonists still slept, and Jad could hear snoring drifting through the night air. Their rows of makeshift wood, metal, and fabric dwellings looked as they usually did, not as nice as other colonies Jad had seen, but organized enough. White moon was high overhead and blue clouds moved rapidly in front of it, casting everything in short bursts of moonlight and shadow. Around the hodgepodge dwellings, Mother Wind was still, though Jad could hear her racing past the edges of the colony a short distance away. It was a peaceful night, a night for sitting under the stars with a lover or telling stories beneath the moon.

Like Jad, a few other people were stepping out, worried about the shudders beneath their feet.

“What was that?” Jad’s neighbor asked in a whisper. He was a middle-aged man with beady eyes. He was nice enough, but not someone Jad was particularly close to.

“I dunno. Ya think sump’n hit us?” another man wondered.

Jad peered back into his tent, holding the tent-flap aside for light with his anxiety growing. Kalira was definitely not there, though she had been when they had rocked Ben to sleep and lain down together. Their infant son still dozed peacefully in a damaged wooden crate that took up a quarter of the tent. He was wrapped in a thick, lovingly patched blanket.

*Don’t be so damn jumpy, Jad told himself, looking back out over the shelters and taking a deep, soothing breath. A piece of debris just hit the colony. We’ll check it out in the mornin’. Kalira was prolly havin’ trouble sleepin’ again and went fer a walk.* It was just bad timing and fear getting the best of him.

He was preparing to wait for her in the beauty of the night when a groaning rumble tore apart the stillness, and the ground shook violently. Thrown off-balance, Jad stumbled backwards into his tent and bumped painfully into Ben’s crate before he was able to force his weight forward and catch himself with one hand on the ground. By the time his fingers touched the dirt, everything was still again.

*Shit, he thought, this is bad.* There were only two possibilities: debris... or a break.

In the crate, Ben woke and began to wail, kicking apart the blanket that bundled him and shaking his fists.

“Easy, buddy,” Jad mumbled distractedly. He scooped both his boy and the blanket into his arms. It didn’t matter what the cause of the tremors was anymore, that last one was bad, they had to treat it as though the colony were—

A horn blared, ear piercing against the quiet of the night. Jad froze as the sound consumed him. His mouth went dry, and he felt as though he had been kissed by a ghost. It was certain then. They hadn't just been hit by a large piece of debris. The colony was breaking. The watcher had seen a sign. Voices began yelling outside, cursing and barking orders.

Ben wailed harder as Jad held him with one arm and used the other to thrust the tent flap aside. Together, they burst back out into the night.

"Kalira!" Jad yelled as loudly as he could. He prayed that wherever she was, she could hear him, but as he stood on his tiptoes and scanned over the tops of the shelters, he saw no sign of her and the ball of nervousness in his gut grew up into his chest.

"Shit," he mumbled to himself, beginning to feel panicked, "where is she?"

The lines of tents and shelters that had been so peaceful were exploding to life, and the serenity of the night was shattered.

"Colony break! Everyone git to the gliders!" Teenagers dressed in rags bounded up and down the rows, yelling. Men, women, and children ducked in and out of their dwellings, jerking loved ones and their few possessions out into the moonlight. Shelters were collapsed in clouds of dust, and the owners who had tents rolled them into bundles and slung them onto their backs. Starting as a trickle but rapidly growing into a flood, people surged onto a cracked road that led towards the five emergency gliders. Jad hesitated in front of his tent, looking frantically around for Kalira. Where was she? Why wasn't she able to get back to her family in an emergency? Their colony wasn't a very big place...

"Gitchyer ass movin' boy!" Gordon roared, running up from behind Jad's tent. He was Jad's amazingly hairy mentor who had the brawn to match; a tough man that reminded Jad of his father. When Jad didn't move, Gordon stopped to glare down at him.

"Ya seen Kalira?" Jad asked.

Gordon set a hand on his shoulder. "I'll keep my eyes open, son, but we gotta move. She'll be doin' the same if she knows what's good for her."

A sick feeling settled over Jad, and he shivered. Gordon was right; he couldn't wait. Just like everyone else, he knew there weren't enough gliders for all the colonists, and above all, he had to get his son to safety. With a final look around and a curse, Jad left his tent behind and joined the mob. Gordon ran just a few steps behind him.

Another crack rang out like a gunshot and Mother Wind began tearing across the surface of the colony with a fury. She was warm and filled with blue dust that clawed at clothes and attacked the eyes. The already depleted rows of dwellings degraded rapidly into shambles and people tripped over stray ropes or dodged around canvas, wood, and thin sheets of metal blowing away in Mother Wind's rage. Everyone was yelling, screaming, or crying as they raced onto the road.

All were neighbors Jad knew and cared for, but their panicked faces suddenly seemed foreign to him and even the most civilized among them were degrading into something thoughtless and wrong. He ran with them, searching the faces of those around him for his wife.

A few men lit torches and held them aloft so people could see through the increasing amount of dust that was blotting out the moonlight. The torches flickered eerily as Mother Wind pounded at them, casting everything in dramatic bursts of orange and shadow that leapt and danced like frolicking devils. Like the watchers, the torch bearers had their assigned duties in an emergency, but though they tried to look brave, their faces held as much blank terror as many of the people running. Their numbers were far lower than the number of men that had been assigned the noble duty—faced with an actual break, several men had decided to forget about holding torches and just run.

The torches were only lit during emergencies, and as Jad ran, he thought the dueling shadows they caused made everything feel threatening. His neighbors, already nearly unrecognizable in their fear, became flickering apparitions or fiery devils, fighting one another for the lead.

Jad peered pointedly around as his feet pounded the pavement, squinting against the dust, but there was no sign of Kalira. People were shoving and pushing violently in the mob, and he had to focus to keep on his feet.

Gordon grabbed his shirt more than once to keep him up when he stumbled.

Everyone had their heads tilted down against Mother Wind, and many had wrapped their faces in fabric to keep the acrid blue dust out of their mouths and noses. Jad didn't know if he would be able to recognize his wife even if she was nearby. He clung to his bawling son with every fiber of his being.

With a jolt and several loud snaps, the ground split apart a few feet to the right of the road, spewing more blue dust into the air and causing everything to tremble. Those who had been pushed to the road's right edge suddenly found nothing beneath their feet, and they floated, flailing into the black chasm with terrified screams. The lucky ones grabbed at the edge and struggled to climb up with Mother Wind pounding against them from below. Two or three succeeded in the climb even as the edge they were clinging to crumbled into the gap and blasted upwards. More than a few others were knocked unconscious against the stone or scratched to bloody pieces by debris.

On the road, Jad weaved to maintain his balance, battered by those stumbling around him. Other runners toppled over and had to scramble back up as people crashed into them or climbed over to get by. The distance between the shelters and the gliders had never seemed so long.

The colony was falling apart. It had only been a small chunk of land to begin with, falling through Mother Wind with its group of struggling survivors living on top. Soon, there would be nothing left but more dust.

With adrenaline pumping through him, Jad pushed himself harder, running parallel to the new crevice a few meters from the edge. The crowd surged forward around him. Beside them, the crevice's opposite edge began rising higher, creating a cliff face on the other side of the gap as though the Gods themselves were reshaping the land and rapidly building a mountain. The ground on Jad's side began to tilt away, lowering to Jad's left. Mother Wind rushed up from the crevice at the base of the emergent cliff, forcing ever more grit into the air.

All the torch bearers were running now, guiding everyone who ran with them by their spluttering flames. No one could yell anymore, and the panic was disturbingly silent other than the howling of Mother Wind and the coughs of those choking on dust.

"Kalira!" Jad rasped her name again as he ran, receiving a mouthful of dust that made him cough and crunched between his teeth. He tried to look around some more, blinking rapidly against the grit, but everything was a blur of terror-stricken faces and the dust was getting so thick he could barely see a few feet in front of him.

His side of the ground continued to tilt away from the opposite edge's cliff, making it increasingly difficult for everyone to run. Up ahead, Jad could just make out the gliders as massive black shadows in the dust whose outlines looked like dragons or immense mythical beasts. The colonists had been building them recently as a safety measure, but supplies were scarce. There were only five finished gliders total, capable of carrying about fifteen men each. It wasn't nearly enough, yet they were the only things that could save anyone from the oblivion that was crashing down on them.

The woman in front of Jad fell suddenly. His legs slammed into her with the sickening snap of breaking bones. He heard her scream in pain, and then he was falling. Gordon's hand grabbed at his shirt even as he fought to get his feet back under him, but Gordon missed and Jad's feet failed.

He was going down.

He twisted instinctively and fell onto his back, curling into a ball to try to protect Ben. He hit the pavement hard. The air burst out of him in a painful rush. A burning sensation seared through his chest as if a claw had twisted into his heart. He clung to his son, shielding him with his body as people careened into them, sending him skidding and rolling across the cracked and broken pavement. It tore at him like sand paper, ripping through clothes and peeling bloody gashes in his skin, but he didn't let go.

He focused only on wrapping his body around Ben to keep him safe and clung to the boy with all the determination he had.

After what seemed like an eternity, the crowd passed. Jad found himself wheezing on the tilted ground in a dust-coated group of others. He struggled to his hands and knees and spat out a large gob of blue dust. The pain of the peeled skin on his back was intense, a searing throb that screamed at him, but there was nothing he could do about it. He looked down at Ben and was relieved to see that he seemed okay other than a minor scrape on his forehead.

Wincing and grinding his teeth, Jad struggled to his knees and turned again towards the gliders and the swarm of people that had left him behind. He coughed painfully. His chest burned with every breath and breathing in was difficult. His left ankle nearly gave way when he forced himself the rest of the way to his feet. He looked through the dust at the groaning people up and down the road. Several were dead; others had been beaten beyond recognition and were merely laying there whimpering with shattered and bloody wounds. More than one was begging for help. Gordon was nowhere to be seen. It was a nightmare.

A woman clutched the broken body of a young girl to her chest near Jad's feet. "No!" she wailed, her voice breaking, "Molly, no!"

Jad longed to help them, but he didn't know what to do. He looked at Ben again. The boy was alternating between bawling and coughing up dust. A thin line of blood trickled from the scrape on his forehead. Clenching his teeth, Jad left the wounded behind and limped towards the gliders. He couldn't save everyone, but maybe he could still save his boy.

Ahead, people were swarming onto the gliders' rope ladders by the dozens. Each of the five gliders was supported by a wooden frame that held it up off the ground, allowing it to take off easily over the colony's edge once it was released. It was obvious that when they took off, they would be tragically overloaded, probably to a fatal degree. No one cared. With dust swirling around them and the ground breaking away, they had lost their minds to hysteria.

As Jad stumbled towards the mob, the cliff that had risen up beside the road began crumbling away into chunks and disappearing into Mother Wind, replaced by a raging, dust-filled blackness as dark as oblivion. The remaining ground continued to tilt, making each step ever more painful for his injured ankle. He tried not to cough as mere breathing sent tearing pains through his chest and back, but the dust made it impossible. The gliders weren't far, less than thirty feet.

Then, as though everything falling to pieces wasn't sufficient for the terrible wrath of the Gods, the ground tilted enough that the gliders began to slide, frame and all, drifting towards the colony's edge. Their wooden frames made a horrible screeching against the pavement below them that mocked the screams of the colonists. There was a collective gasp of dismay as everyone saw what was happening, and the fight to climb the ladders became gruesomely intense. The Colonists tore one another down from the rungs, throwing their neighbors into the roiling mass of people below which swallowed them and battered them to the ground.

A moment later, one of the five frames collapsed, dropping the glider it held with pops of snapping wood. The falling glider caught the group of people trying to climb into it, pinning them down and dragging them across the sloped pavement. Their agonized screams rose above the yelling and cursing crowd.

On the road, Jad stopped ten feet from the horde around the gliders and stood staring, horrified, unwilling to take his son further. He glanced behind him at where his tent had been and could see nothing but dusty blackness. The peaceful, wonderful life he had begun with Kalira was gone, torn away by this hell. The blackness was pressing in, promising to end it all permanently.

A woman ran out of it. Her hair was a mess and her whole body was caked in blue dust. Jad nearly rushed to her, certain that Kalira had reached him at last, but then she looked up at him and he saw her face. It wasn't Kalira. It was Bethy, one of the colony's gardeners. She saw why Jad had stopped

and froze as well, staring at the dusty swarm of fighting colonists. She was cradling a broken arm against her chest. Her eyes filled with tears and she walked the last few steps before collapsing hopelessly to her knees beside him.

“Gods help us,” she murmured.

Jad looked down at the despair on her face and felt a grim determination rise up inside him. He wouldn’t let his son die here without a fight. He had been born a fighter, and if today was going to be his last, he would die a fighter too.

He set his jaw and plowed into the crowd, holding Ben with one arm and using the other to mercilessly pummel anyone who stood in his way. He was seventeen, strong, and in excellent shape. His free arm slammed into someone’s face with a brutal crunch. He rammed a woman out of the way with his shoulder. He stepped on the chest of a man who had fallen to the ground. Over a dozen broke before him, his blows stealing any chance they had of salvation as they fell unconscious or wounded to the crowd. He watched them fall and felt a pang of guilt for every one of them, but he wouldn’t let it stop him. He chased a glider down.

He finally reached its rope ladder with everyone’s hands clawing and pounding at him, but he didn’t relent. He grabbed a rung and began forcing his way up, kicking people off of his legs and launching his free hand up one rung at a time. He climbed with the adrenaline fueled strength and intensity of a demon, even as the glider he was trying to get into continued its screeching slide across the ground, gathering momentum. The people grasping at him began falling away. But just as Jad was reaching his free hand to the top of the ladder and the rail of the glider itself—the whole thing fell over the colony’s edge.

He clung to both Ben and the ladder as they dropped at least three meters before Mother Wind caught the glider’s wings and tore it from its frame. For a terrifying moment, Jad thought he wouldn’t be able to hold on. His right palm was slick with blood from clinging desperately to the rope. But just before he slipped, the pilot regained control and the glider smoothed out and drifted lazily into the night.

With a grunt, Jad pulled himself and Ben up and into the glider, shoving in amongst the people inside. He lay there for a moment, gasping for breath. His chest and back were infernos of pain. Emotion welled inside him, and he found himself crying and laughing simultaneously. Uncontrollably. Joyously. Painfully.

Then the silence settled over him like a shroud, filled only by the ceaseless singing of Mother Wind and Ben’s soft, dust-choked whimpers. No one spoke, and their dirt-stained faces stared back in the direction of the colony with streaks of tears running from their eyes. Struggling to his feet, Jad was surprised by the lack of people in the glider. It had looked like all the gliders would be drastically overloaded, but this one wasn’t. It was under loaded. The Colonists had fought amongst themselves so ferociously that few had actually made it in.

He looked down at the blood on his knuckles as his heart filled with shame. Killing was nothing new to him, but sentencing people he knew and cared for to death... He looked back up at the crumbling colony. All he could do was offer prayers for those who were falling into the nothingness, and he whispered the words as he watched. He knew their faces would join the others to haunt his nightmares, probably for the rest of his life.

Aside from theirs, only one glider had successfully taken off. Of the five, two had fallen to the ground, splintering and crushing people beneath them. A third hadn’t freed itself of its frame and was plummeting, over-weighted, into the darkness below. With only eight people in it, Jad’s glider was drifting safely through the night’s blackness, and they could just make out the one other successful glider through the haze.

The last of the colony was breaking apart and dozens of wailing people were tumbling into emptiness. The massive chunk of falling land they had all lived on was becoming nothing more than rubble. Jad had only lived there for eighteen months, but that falling chunk of land had become more of

a home to him than anywhere in his life. For once, he had found a sense of place. The Colonists there had accepted him, and he had come to care for them.

But the world was a harsh place. He had learned that as a boy, and this wasn't the first disaster he had seen, though it might be the worst.

He looked at each of the faces in the glider around him, praying that one of them was his wife's. None were. He looked down at his son and saw blood splattered over his blanket. It was the blood of the people Jad had called friends, and the sight of it brought tears flooding to his eyes.

As he clung to his son and solemnly watched his neighbors fall, he held on to the small hope that Kalira was in the other glider.

Hours later, when the two gliders pulled up beside one another as the sun came up, Jad learned for certain that she was gone.

"Anything that falls is gone forever," he mumbled as he blinked back tears and looked out at the sun rising through the haze. It was something his father had always told him, and the last words that had passed between them when Jad decided to give up everything to be with Kalira. But as he struggled to stand strong and not show his emotions for the other people in the glider, Jad realized he had never believed it.

Somewhere out there, his wife still lived, and someday he would find her.